

Milwaukee

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MOVIEGOERS

In The Spotlight: Milwaukee Summer Entertainment Camp

BY MACK BATES

When most people think about summer camp, acting exercises, screenwriting tips and video editing aren't usually the first identifiers that spring to mind. However, if South Milwaukee native Kyle Olson, who founded the [Milwaukee Summer Entertainment Camp](#) (or MSEC, for short) has anything to say about it, most people will add those activities to their list of summer camp identifiers.

Olson currently resides in southern California and works in the entertainment industry primarily behind-the-scenes in television production (some of his credits include the CW's "America's Next Top Model, FOX's "Glee", and NBC's "The Voice" and "Last Call With Carson Daly"). He says it's his love of the arts and his love for teaching that led him to create and launch the Milwaukee Summer Entertainment Camp three years ago. "I owe much of how I started in this industry to my time in Milwaukee, and I wanted to find a unique way to give back to the place where I got my start," Olson recently shared in a one-on-one with Moviegoers' Mack Bates.

"I first fell in love with the arts when I was in elementary school. My dad gave me a still camera, and that was it, love at first sight. Or first click!"

He did "a ton of work" at the South Milwaukee Performing Arts Center, which he credits for feeding his interests in the arts. Olson also served on the board of the short-lived Milwaukee Spotlight Student Film Festival which was founded by Dominic Inouye, an English teacher, and James Carlson, executive director of Bucketworks.

When Olson started the camp back in 2009, the goal was to give local high school students some real-life work experience in the entertainment industry over the course of a couple of weeks. "I knew what that type of exposure meant for me growing up," Olson said, "and how much it helped me to develop personally and professionally."

Unless working in the theater was your goal, local teens didn't really have an outlet available to them to experience firsthand how the creative process works in film and television production prior to Olson founding the camp. An amalgamation of film, television and theater craft and technique, the camp has influenced some of its past participants to pursue careers in entertainment, a fostering that may not have happened had Olson not taken his dream for such a camp and made it a reality.

“The [camp’s] two primary focuses have always been EXPERIENCE and EXPOSURE. Not just having an opportunity to create stories, films, etc... but also having the chance to meet with local professionals and to see local professional venues.”

Olson returns home every summer to throw the camp, which runs for two and a half weeks (including the red carpet premiere and wrap party). During that time, Olson and a rotating team of professionals, mostly local who volunteer their time and services, walk the campers through the creative process in a series of workshops, Q&A sessions, field trips, tutorials and production immersion. Then at the end of each summer session, the campers get to show projects they've worked on to their families, friends and one another. In 2011, the camp was able to hold its first red carpet premiere.

Admittedly, Olson has always dreamt and thought big, but even he didn't foresee just how much attention his camp, a true labor of love, would generate in such a relatively short period of time.

“The camp started as a shot in the dark. I knew it would be something the kids would enjoy, but I had no idea other people would ‘catch on’ and support us as much as they have.”

Some of those “other people” include local personalities like John McGivern, Katrina Cravy, Portia Young, and Kidd O’Shea— to name a few— and well-known celebrities like Martin Sheen, Jeff Foxworthy, Drew Carey, Phyllis Diller, the cast of Nickelodeon’s “iCarly”, and very recently, Oprah Winfrey.

Back in 2010, during the camp’s second session, campers wrote and produced a video parody of the Katy Perry smash hit single, “California Gurls” entitled “[Us Milwaukee Girls](#)”. The video has nearly 100,000 hits on YouTube and Perry was so impressed by the parody (arguably the first) that she put it up on her own officially-sanctioned website.

Olson credits The Mix (99.1 WMYX) as the reason the parody took off as quickly as it did. “We found ourselves on Katy Perry’s page almost as quickly

as we uploaded the video. It seemed like within just a week or two, she was posting it on her site, long before many of the other ‘California Gurls’ parodies came out. Much of that is thanks to Kidd and Elizabeth from 99.1 The Mix. They took our song and ran with it. They didn’t just give it a shout out, they posted it on their website, played it on the air for weeks straight, and encouraged the community to support the video. We are remarkably thankful to them for their support on the project.”

Olson has stayed in contact with almost every one of the campers from the first years. Many of them will be graduating this year and, of those students, almost all of them are looking to pursue a degree in the entertainment industry with dreams to be either on-screen talent or work in some capacity behind-the-scenes. Of the few that have already graduated high school, two have gone on to pursue entertainment-related careers—one as an actor, and the other as a producer.

“A lot of campers value the fact that we look at the definition of entertainment from all aspects. Not everyone is gung-ho about the prospect of sending their kids to a camp or a school where the end game is to act on Broadway. And some of the campers themselves would have had no interest in attending such a camp. There are plenty of jobs within the entertainment industry that are far more realistic and obtainable.”

One of the many things that’s admirable about the camp, and about what Olson and company are doing, is that every participant gets to be a part of something they may have never gotten a chance to do otherwise. Even if some of the campers never actively pursue a career in the entertainment industry or decide against it, they’ll always be able to say that they took part in the camp and had a fun, informative, once-in-a-lifetime experience. Just think of the campers who are featured in and/or worked on “Us Milwaukee Girls”, they’ll be able to share that with their children and grandchildren someday.

A [feature-length documentary about the camp](#), directed by Rachel Womack (of Today and Forever Videos), is due to be released this year, and Olson is launching a [fundraising campaign](#) this week in hopes of keeping the camp going, as well as searching for new ways to expand upon the brand.

“This whole camp experience has been rewarding on numerous levels. Seeing the campers understand that they CAN do it, and they CAN achieve great things has been very rewarding. I love this camp and everything it stands for. I think it’s a great ‘hidden gem’, in some ways, for our community. So I want to keep it going for as long as possible.”